

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 20:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

If even the loveliest of things can seem coarse in poor light, and the sweetest of dishes can sour a day later, it stands to reason that even a seemingly pious act can go off-kilter out of context. Now, that's a hard lesson for any one of us to learn, to say nothing of the pious. For when someone sets out to do good, he or she never expects it to go wrong. But even the best of intentions can go off course.

As such, Ramchal calls for upon the pious to always engage in what he terms "evaluating piety" -- determining beforehand whether what they're about to do will do good, as they'd like it to, or the very opposite.

But being "the most difficult and subtle element of piety" as Ramchal terms it, and the one that "the yetzer harah has a lot of input in" to boot, it's not easy to carry this evaluating process off. As "the yetzer harah can convince you to avoid doing many good things..., and can draw you into committing many transgressions" if your judgment's off on this.

"In truth," he says, "the only way one can do this evaluating process well is to fulfill these three conditions". First, "your heart must be the most forthright of hearts"; second, "your only motivation should be to bring satisfaction to G-d"; and third, "you should reflect deeply upon your actions" and their outcomes from the first.

But even then it might not work, though; because people are often capricious, and situations are invariably un-readable beforehand. So, what are we to do then? "Cast your lot upon G-d" and pray for the best.

Disregard this warning and do whatever you assume will be for the best, Ramchal warns, "and you'll be dangerously close to stumbling and falling" instead of doing good. And your piety would have lead to dire impiety.

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